

Grow a Show:  
Considerations in Creating Entertaining Performances  
for the Modern Chamber Ensemble  
by  
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## ABSTRACT

This paper is the writing component of a project the author undertook to create an entertaining program for a chamber ensemble. It discusses ways for chamber ensembles to create entertaining concert programs for today's audiences. Information was gathered by analyzing four interesting and successful groups—The Canadian Brass, Mnozil Brass, Les Trompettes de Lyon, and The Blue Man Group—and identifying common traits. These traits help facilitate the ultimate goal of making connections with audiences and include originality, comedy, choreography, memorization, continuous presentation, musical appeal, high quality presentations, and the proper personnel. These attributes were then implemented into the author's experimental group, the Omni Brass Ensemble, for testing with live audiences. Materials were used from published interviews, articles, newspapers, ensemble websites, and recordings of their performances. From the author's performances with the Omni Brass Ensemble, indications are that these findings work with live audiences.

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## INTRODUCTION

Chamber ensembles interested in regularly performing together, and generating interest for new audiences, may want to consider creating an entertaining program. Currently, there are chamber ensembles that are having success performing for a wide range of audiences. They perform varied repertoire and present an entertaining concert experience. This paper examines four of these groups and articulates performance reasons for their success. These attributes are then implemented by the author's own performing ensemble, the Omni Brass Ensemble, for experimentation with live audiences.

Historically, entertaining brass chamber ensembles have thrived in the United States. In his dissertation,<sup>1</sup> David Burkhart documents the neglected era of what he calls the First American Chamber Brass School, from 1877 to 1939. He gives detailed information about sixty-one different brass chamber ensembles that performed for audiences all over North America and Europe. The instrumentation of these ensembles varies, from any mixture of brass instruments to homogenous ensembles. The most common number of instrumentalists in a group was four, but the musicians often doubled on other instruments and sang. These ensembles traveled primarily around the United States and Canada, performing entertaining shows in the Lyceum and Chautauqua circuits. Their repertoire was mostly classical selections from famous composers such as Wagner, Verdi, and Bach.

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<sup>1</sup> David Burkhart, "Brass Chamber Music in Lyceum and Chautauqua" (PhD diss., Claremont Graduate University, 2010).

However, they did have popular musical selections that would be interspersed throughout their performances.

Three of these ensembles are of particular interest because of their similarities with the types of ensembles discussed in this paper. The first group is the Park Sisters (1885-1910s). This famous and well-traveled female cornet quartet was a versatile ensemble that performed thousands of concerts in North America and Europe. They were multi-instrumentalists, playing trombone, piano, zither, and mandolin equally well. They dressed in elegant attire and performed repertoire that was described as “grand and light operatic selections, fantasias, descriptive pieces, marches, etc..., for cornet quartet, mandolin quartet, cornet, mandolin and zither solos.”<sup>2</sup> A review in the *Court Circular* paper of London notes that when the Park Sisters played Levy’s *Polka de Concert*, it “fairly brought down the house.”<sup>3</sup> The star of the ensemble was Annie Park, who in 1903 gave cornet lessons to the young Edna White, a prominent trumpet soloist during the 1910s and ‘20s.

The second group is the Chicago Glee Club (1900-1915). This trombone quartet had a successful sixteen-season performing career that saw 3,901 performances throughout the United States and Canada. This ensemble received positive reviews in newspapers until they disbanded in 1915. They recorded one album on the Victor label, which had commercial success. Their performances

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 192-93.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 193.

included singing, varied trombone quartet repertoire, and even one member of the group doing character impersonations in make-up.

The last group of interest is The Weatherwax Brothers Quartet (1896-1917). They were a well-known trumpet quartet that featured two brothers on B-flat trumpets, and the other two on specially made low E-flat trumpets. Their brochure describes them as having a program that included singing, trumpet quartets, and readings. Their performances were likened to Vaudeville-type shows, and were described as fast-paced shows “of harmony and heart throbs.”<sup>4</sup>

Burkhart’s work shows that entertaining brass chamber ensembles have previously existed and thrived in the United States. Most of their repertoire was based on transcriptions of famous European classical works, but they also incorporated popular songs of the day into their programs. Their concert presentations were entertaining and accessible to a wide range of audiences. Burkhart does not describe how these groups went about putting on their programs; he only documents that they did them.

In his dissertation,<sup>5</sup> Scott Rimm-Hewitt describes the impact that Luther Henderson’s musical arrangements had on the Canadian Brass ensemble. Luther Henderson was a famous Broadway and jazz arranger who was commissioned by the Canadian Brass to create non-classical arrangements for the group. Their musical partnership began in 1978 when the Canadian Brass commissioned Henderson to arrange music for their *Mostly Fats* album. These non-classical

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 259.

<sup>5</sup> Scott L. Rimm-Hewitt, “The Impact of Luther Henderson’s Arrangements upon the Canadian Brass” (DMA diss., The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 2004).

arrangements were incorporated into Canadian Brass concerts to create greater musical diversity for the listener. In total, Henderson provided 150 non-classical arrangements for the group with the goal of helping the ensemble communicate and connect with audiences. Rimm-Hewitt's dissertation adds insight as to how Luther Henderson helped the Canadian Brass make better connections with the audience, giving useful details of how certain repertoire enhances performances.

There are other dissertations on the history, development, and repertoire of the brass quintet, such as those by Van Ess (1963)<sup>6</sup> and Starkey (1955),<sup>7</sup> but they cover the traditional aspects of the genre. These documents describe different aspects of the brass quintet and do not necessarily describe how different ensembles went about creating entertaining performances, which is what the document at hand intends to do.

The first chapter analyzes four interesting and successful ensembles that appealed to the author—the Canadian Brass, Mnozil Brass, Les Trompettes de Lyon, and the Blue Man Group. The Canadian Brass was chosen because it was one of the first brass quintets to try and create an entertaining concert experience. The accounts of their early experiences are of particular interest to the author. Mnozil Brass and Les Trompettes de Lyon were included because they expanded on the concert experience the Canadian Brass established. They have moved well beyond the traditional concert format to the point where they have created a

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<sup>6</sup> Donald Harrison Van Ess, "The Stylistic Evolution of the English Brass Ensemble" (PhD diss., Boston University Graduate School, 1963).

<sup>7</sup> Willard A. Starkey, "The History and Practice of Ensemble Music for Lip-Reed Instruments" (PhD diss., University of Iowa, 1955).



seamless production that could be described more as a show than a concert. The Blue Man Group was included because they are great examples of how to create an entertaining program for an unusual instrumentation, on a large scale, and with multimedia

Each ensemble is profiled by their history, repertoire, and performance characteristics. Information on these groups comes from the actual members of the ensembles through published interviews, film documentaries, and recorded performances. Chapter two identifies commonly shared traits of these ensembles. Attributes are discussed trait by trait with supporting examples of how each ensemble uses them. The third chapter covers the author's experience of forming his own chamber ensemble—the Omni Brass Ensemble—and creating entertaining performances. The results of this ensemble's attempt to apply the attributes of the successful ensembles are recounted here.

## DELIMITATIONS

This paper focuses on the performance aspects of how to create an entertaining program for chamber ensembles. It does not discuss or list every single brass, percussion, string, vocal, woodwind, or any other instrumental chamber group that puts on entertaining programs. There are many interesting and successful chamber ensembles of varying types, but the ones chosen for this paper are for the reasons given above. Also, this paper does not discuss extra-

performance factors for success, such as marketing or business savvy, nor does it discuss socio-economic factors in audiences' artistic preferences.

# CHAPTER 1

## SUCCESSFUL CHAMBER ENSEMBLES

### The Canadian Brass

The Canadian Brass is perhaps the most successful brass quintet to date. They have performed around the world to enthusiastic audiences in major, sold-out venues. They were one of the first brass quintets to perform in such concert halls as Carnegie Hall, the Kennedy Center, and the Hollywood Bowl.<sup>8</sup> Their performances are filled with a variety of musical selections mixed with comedy, speaking, and choreography. Their goal is to put on a high-quality performance that is entertaining “because [they] don’t want to sit through anything boring.”<sup>9</sup>

Because of the non-traditional nature of their performances, critics of the Canadian Brass view them as not being a serious chamber music ensemble. The ensemble was even given nicknames such as “The Marx Brothers of Brass” and “Court Jesters of Chamber Music.”<sup>10</sup> Despite such descriptions, the Canadian Brass was one of the few “full-time [brass] quintet[s] in the world” and they “solidified the genre of brass quintet and really defined where it was going.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Vincent Cichowicz, “The Canadian Brass,” *The Instrumentalist* (1985) in *Brass Anthology: a collection of brass articles published in The Instrumentalist magazine from 1946 to 1999* (Northfield, Ill.: Instrumentalist Pub., 1999), 718.

<sup>9</sup> Ronald Romm as quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 715.

<sup>11</sup> Fred Mills as quoted in Adams, “Life after the Canadian Brass,” *ITG Journal* vol. 25, No. 4 (June 2001): 9.

The Canadian Brass started as a Toronto-based brass quintet in the early 1970s.<sup>12</sup> Eugene Watts, then principal trombone of the Toronto Symphony, loved chamber music and wanted to put a brass quintet together. The original group consisted of Eugene Watts on trombone, Charles Daellenbach on tuba, Fred Mills and Ronald Romm on trumpets, and Graeme Page on French horn. All of the members were trained as orchestral musicians but were fluent in other musical styles. “We are 100% musicians who trained for classical music careers and found a way to make a living.”<sup>13</sup> This musical versatility is an important trait for these musicians to have because their “performances require a remarkable musical facility.” They “end up covering everything—serious, classical music, early jazz, comedy, [and] blues.”<sup>14</sup> In the early days of the ensemble, they became members of the Philharmonic Orchestra of Hamilton, Ontario, Canada.<sup>15</sup> This affiliation was an important training ground for the group that provided a foundation that propelled their careers to stardom.

Early performances included educational concerts for children. A main function of the Philharmonic Orchestra of Hamilton was to have many different chamber ensembles to provide outreach concerts to schools. The group took these performances seriously and felt that “the children’s concerts were the most important things in our lives at that time. It gave us the opportunity to learn

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<sup>12</sup> Cichowicz, 715.

<sup>13</sup> Eugene Watts as quoted in Harvey Phillips, “Breaking the Tradition of Formal Concerts,” *The Instrumentalist* (1994) in *Brass Anthology: a collection of brass articles published in The Instrumentalist magazine from 1946 to 1999* (Northfield, Ill.: Instrumentalist Pub., 1999), 981.

<sup>14</sup> Martin Hackleman as quoted in Cichowicz, 718.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 716.

repertoire, relate to audiences, and develop as a group.”<sup>16</sup> The thinking of the group was, “what can we do that will make it interesting for us and unusual for the kids?”<sup>17</sup> They realized that “children are a very fast audience. They’re quick to identify what is or is not interesting to them.”<sup>18</sup> These performances allowed the group to immediately see how to put together a performance that could be both educational and exciting.

Constantly trying out new ideas, their performances gradually began to take shape. They were moving towards a new type of concert presentation that included musical variety, talking, comedy, and a bit of theatre. A large portion of the program was memorized because it allowed the group greater ease in making a connection with the audience.<sup>19</sup> “It’s important to us that the people get involved in the music. We feel a responsibility to see to it that the audience has fun. A good performance isn’t enough; people have to go out feeling happy.”<sup>20</sup>

Talking between pieces came about by way of necessity. Endurance is a factor for brass players and, to break up the work load, the Canadian Brass decided to start speaking. “Because it’s so physically demanding to play a brass instrument we need good endurance. When we had a period of time between two pieces, instead of just looking at the audience and resting, we figured we’d say something to the audience. One thing led to another, and we haven’t stopped

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<sup>16</sup> Eugene Watts as quoted in Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Eugene Watts as quoted in Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Eugene Watts as quoted in Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 715.

<sup>20</sup> Charles Daellenbach as quoted in Ibid., 715.

talking since.”<sup>21</sup> This verbal communication with the audience included comedy, and became an integral part of their shows.

Theatrical elements also found their way into Canadian Brass performances. Their idea was to include as much as they possibly could into the presentation, to enhance the experience for the audience:

Rather than approaching music with the idea of simply faithfully reproducing something that Beethoven did, we present ourselves as people who talk, think, have feelings, and relate to our audiences as people. Just as ballet is a combination of music and dance, opera is a combination of music, theatre, and art, what we are doing is combining everything that we can do. It’s not just a concert or a recital; it’s really a very special presentation of our talents.<sup>22</sup>

The Canadian Brass began at a time when there were not many pieces written for brass quintets. To help alleviate this problem the group designated twenty percent of their earnings for the use of building their repertoire.<sup>23</sup> They viewed this investment as going towards a type of “research and development”<sup>24</sup> department for their organization. At first, members of the group made many transcriptions and arrangements themselves. Fred Mills transcribed and arranged their famous version of Bach’s *Toccatà and Fugue* and many other notable pieces. As their performance schedule became more rigorous, there was simply not enough time or energy to continue doing their own arrangements. In 1985

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<sup>21</sup> Charles Daellenbach as quoted in Ibid., 718.

<sup>22</sup> Eugene Watts as quoted in Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Phillips, 982.

<sup>24</sup> Charles Daellenbach as quoted in Cichowicz, 717.

they “invested \$20,000 in music, and that’s about what we spend every year.”<sup>25</sup>

That money went to arrangers such as Arthur Frackenpohl and Luther Henderson.<sup>26</sup>

The original lack of repertoire was a problem but it also provided an opportunity. “String players have an incredible wealth of music; if they only had Mozart to play for the rest of their lives, that would be enough. Because brass players have had to play in stage bands, brass bands, and jazz bands, our background is quite varied. We can do Fats Waller or a jazz piece because it’s part of our heritage.”<sup>27</sup> This variety of music created “an advantage” in “programming our concerts because a string quartet could not get away with playing a piece like our *Doggone Blues*.”<sup>28</sup>

The musical selections for concerts had to meet certain criteria in order to be performed. “The core of good programming is to find exciting music that the performers want to share with an audience... When people yawn or give polite applause, we know the music isn’t well received.”<sup>29</sup> For the Canadian Brass, it was important to have a program that they themselves “would like to see and hear.”<sup>30</sup> Through trial and error, and countless performances, the Canadian Brass experimented with audiences to find out what music received the most reaction. This was important knowledge for them to obtain, because in their performances

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<sup>25</sup> Charles Daellenbach as quoted in Ibid., 717.

<sup>26</sup> Phillips, 982.

<sup>27</sup> Eugene Watts as quoted in Cichowicz, 718.

<sup>28</sup> Martin Hackleman as quoted in Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Charles Daellenbach as quoted in Phillips, 980.

<sup>30</sup> Charles Daellenbach as quoted in Ibid.

“music is the vehicle,” but the goal “is making contact with the audience.”<sup>31</sup> The whole focus in selecting music was to find a way to make a connection with the audience. In order to do that, they had to perform music they genuinely enjoyed playing. Their performances were sincere musical offerings.

The Canadian Brass’s criteria for choice of repertoire can be summarized in a two-part formula:

1. “We have to believe in and love the music we present.” If not, “it never gets to the audience.”<sup>32</sup>

2. Can the Canadian Brass “bring something original to the music?”<sup>33</sup>

If both conditions are true, new repertoire could be added. They were very careful in this process because the audience members pay “\$25-40 for an evening of entertainment.” If they are “disappointed, they will not come back.”<sup>34</sup>

Because of their vast experience in performing in front of many audiences, the Canadian Brass knew very well how to program their concerts. In the first half of the show, they knew the audience could stay attuned to more serious music for about 35-40 minutes. They would perform selections from the Renaissance and/or Baroque eras interspersed with lighter pieces such as early jazz works, to vary the musical texture. They were careful in their selection of new music because they wanted to make sure it could be performed “successfully in a concert hall for

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<sup>31</sup> Charles Daellenbach as quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Charles Daellenbach as quoted in *Ibid.*, 983.

<sup>33</sup> Charles Daellenbach as quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Eugene Watts as quoted in *Ibid.*



3,000 people.”<sup>35</sup> They firmly believe that “when performing for an audience not comprised of musicians, a performer has the responsibility to entertain.”<sup>36</sup>

A main objective of the Canadian Brass “is bringing the audience in as a part of the presentation.”<sup>37</sup> They want to get an enthusiastic reaction out of the audience and find a way to include them in the performance. Their goal is to extend or break the rules of the inherited “German recital model” which was “to be quiet from beginning to end.”<sup>38</sup> Their antiphonal Gabrielli selection is an example. They break the stage barrier and traditional concert models by going into the audience to perform the piece. They stand in the aisles in close proximity to concert-goers and surround the audience with music. This configuration literally takes the music to the listeners and brings them into the presentation. Another example is their arrangement of the traditional jazz tune *Just a Closer Walk with Thee*, which was originally one of their encore pieces. After a year, they decided to begin their concerts with it and started playing while walking in from the back of the concert hall. Starting their concerts with an “encore” allowed them to “pick up right where we had left off... It’s definitely our theme song, our theme concept.”<sup>39</sup> This feature of presenting music in a unique way started early on in their careers. “It was a matter of survival... If an audience enjoys a concert, they will come back. This partnership with the audience is so obvious to us that

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<sup>35</sup> Eugene Watts as quoted in Ibid., 983.

<sup>36</sup> Charles Daellenbach as quoted Ibid., 982.

<sup>37</sup> Charles Daellenbach as quoted Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Charles Daellenbach as quoted Ibid., 981.

<sup>39</sup> Charles Daellenbach as quoted Ibid., 980.

we have given everything to develop the relationship.”<sup>40</sup> Even though they wanted to make a connection with the audience, they never had to sacrifice their artistic or musical goals.

### Mnozil Brass

This seven-member brass ensemble is a “unique blend of sheer virtuosity, humor, staging, and overall musical diversity [that] has set them apart from everyone else to the point where they have literally created their own indescribable genre.”<sup>41</sup> They are successful in blending many different musical genres and presenting them in an entertaining way, to the point that their performances have moved well beyond the traditional concert format. The Canadian Brass pushed the boundaries of the traditional concert format, but Mnozil Brass has taken it to the next phase of evolution. Jens Lindemann, trumpet soloist and former member of the Canadian Brass, boldly proclaims that “Mnozil Brass is the greatest brass ensemble in the world today.”<sup>42</sup> Lindemann even goes so far as to say, “Mnozil Brass is quite simply the most amazing thing ever to happen in the history of chamber music!”<sup>43</sup>

On the second Thursday of every month in 1991, a group of Viennese Music Academy students gathered across the street from the school at the Mnozil pub. There, they performed “Austrian/Bohemian” musical selections for brass

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<sup>40</sup> Charles Daellenbach as quoted Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Jens Lindemann, “Mnozil Brass,” *The Brass Herald* (Aug-Sept 2011): 10.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

instruments.<sup>44</sup> A core group emerged from these gatherings in 1992 and had their first formal performance in 1993. The group's name comes from the Mnozil pub because the members view this as the group's birthplace.<sup>45</sup> The current members of the group are Thomas Gansch, Robert Rother, and Roman Rindberger, trumpet; Leonard Paul, Gerhard Füssl, and Zoltan Kiss, trombone; and Wilfried Brandstötter, tuba.<sup>46</sup>

From its beginnings, Mnozil Brass's goal was to "have fun and entertain people."<sup>47</sup> No one in the group suspected that a performing career could be derived from this ensemble. "We just played at the pub and wanted to have as much fun as we could and, of course, have as many drinks as they would buy us."<sup>48</sup> This relaxed performing environment gave Mnozil Brass the time and space to freely develop their own performance style. "The very first performances of Mnozil Brass in the early nineties were completely different to our shows nowadays... We didn't perform concerts at all, but played for weddings, bio-agricultural events, funerals, birthday parties and so on."<sup>49</sup> Even though their performances were underdeveloped, they still had the goal of keeping "a form of tension amongst the audience with the help of acting, dancing, singing and joking."<sup>50</sup> These extra-musical elements would be explored, developed, and fully integrated into their musical presentations to create a unique performance style. It

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> [http://www.mnozilbrass.at/die\\_band.html?&L=1](http://www.mnozilbrass.at/die_band.html?&L=1) (accessed January 26, 2012).

<sup>47</sup> Thomas Gansch as quoted in Lindemann, 10.

<sup>48</sup> Wilfried Brandstötter as quoted in Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Gerhard Füssl as quoted in Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Leonard Paul as quoted in Ibid.

did not take long for the group to discover that “what the seven of us create collectively as Mnozil is bigger than the sum of our individual skills. It’s this magic point you can’t explain.”<sup>51</sup>

The physical aspect of endurance is always an issue in the performance of brass chamber music. The Canadian Brass’s solution to lip fatigue was to talk to the audience. Mnozil Brass had a different solution: “When you have to play all evening, you’ll discover that your lips are getting weak. Need a break? No problem...sing!”<sup>52</sup> Singing created more musical variety and creative opportunities for the ensemble during performances. The band could double as a choir or have individual soloists featured while the rest of the ensemble played accompaniment parts. It also was another way to connect with the audience. Singing “touches the audience in a different way. It’s easier to transport feelings.”<sup>53</sup>

Humor is also a key component of their performance style. “Humor was always a part of our performances...we always had this kind of dark, subversive, non-verbal humor... The nice thing is that our kind of humor works everywhere.”<sup>54</sup> While Mnozil uses humor during musical numbers, it also presents humorous skits between pieces. For example, during the “Western Scene” of their *Magic Moments* show,<sup>55</sup> they walk into an imaginary saloon and order drinks from the bar. Music and these non-musical vehicles are fused

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<sup>51</sup> Wilfried Brandstötter as quoted in Ibid., 12-13.

<sup>52</sup> Thomas Gansch as quoted in Ibid., 13.

<sup>53</sup> Wilfried Brandstötter as quoted in Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Wilfried Brandstötter as quoted in Ibid., 12.

<sup>55</sup> *Magic Moments*. DVD. Directed by Mnozil Brass. 2010; Vienna, Austria: Mnozil Brass, 2010.

together into a seamless production. The result is a show rather than just a recital or concert.

The musical heritage of Mnozil Brass includes a combination of “Austrian Folk Music, Bohemian Brass Music, jazz standards, as well as popular songs... call[ed] ‘Schnulzen’- [or] schmaltzy songs.”<sup>56</sup> Specific ensembles that have influenced Mnozil Brass are the Czech Army Central Band, Pro Brass, Canadian Brass, Lester Bowie’s Brass Fantasy, and many more. Comedic performers such as Spike Jones and the City Slickers, Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy, Victor Borge, and Danny Kaye are also credited as influences.<sup>57</sup> Although the members of the ensemble have various musical tastes, they all have backgrounds in symphonic and theatre orchestras, and/or jazz. Many have even “subbed in the Vienna State Opera.”<sup>58</sup>

In their shows, Mnozil Brass does not play typical brass ensemble pieces. A concert-goer would not hear Tomasi’s *Fanfares Liturgiques*, at least not in its entirety or in a usual way. What they would hear is a little of many different types of music ranging from classical overtures to popular rock songs. Everything is specially arranged for the group because of their unique instrumentation and flowing programs. The French horn, a standard instrument in brass quintets and brass ensembles, was left out. Reasons given by the ensemble include “it just did not happen,”<sup>59</sup> “the French horn blows in the wrong direction,”<sup>60</sup> and “they are

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<sup>56</sup> Gerhard Füssl as quoted in Lindemann, 10.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Wilfried Brandstötter as quoted in Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Thomas Gansch as quoted in Ibid., 11.

not loud enough!”<sup>61</sup> Mnozil Brass is known for their loud volume. “We always joked around with the volume factor. We had fun by overstepping the borders of loudness, sometimes because we were just childish.”<sup>62</sup>

Their idea of a concert experience is also unique. “We try to avoid the traditional concert routine of announcement–music–announcement and so on. We try to keep people’s hearts and minds with whatever is happening on stage. We try to tell an overall story. The pieces are only the connecting dots for the scenes, so it becomes more a show than a concert.”<sup>63</sup> Their repertoire is tailored to what is happening in the show.

When starting the process of creating a new show, the group assembles and decides on repertoire. Any member can contribute a new composition or arrangement, but the music has to be accepted by the majority of the ensemble. “At the beginning of a new period of working on a program, everybody brings ideas and music they want to play... Then we play through it and try to find out if it’s a fit or not.”<sup>64</sup> Even though each member has the opportunity to bring new music, only a few typically contribute on a consistent basis.

Mnozil Brass’s signature piece is Queen’s *Bohemian Rhapsody*, which has 1.4 million views on youtube.com.<sup>65</sup> Examining the way they learned this piece gives insight into how they learn repertoire and put together shows. “We never

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<sup>60</sup> Leonard Paul as quoted in Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Wilfried Brandstötter as quoted in Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Gerhard Füssl as quoted in Ibid., 12.

<sup>63</sup> Thomas Gansch as quoted in Ibid., 13.

<sup>64</sup> Wilfried Brandstötter as quoted in Ibid., 11.

<sup>65</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hBLm747tyn0> (accessed January 26, 2012).

made an arrangement of it, we just listened to the tune very often and used a bad Harmonie band arrangement to get an idea of the structure. We've never written down our arrangement since it was a collective process during the rehearsals.”<sup>66</sup> In other instances as well, Mnozil Brass has not notated new arrangements, but rather the ensemble learns and creates the arrangement together. *Bohemian Rhapsody* has a bit of everything that makes Mnozil Brass distinct. It starts with the whole band singing *a capella*. Gradually, instruments are added to make the texture grow. Thomas Gansch sings the main solo part and in the middle of the song, the band uses choreography to visually demonstrate the intensity of the music. As the piece comes to a close, it finishes with another *a capella* section.

Mnozil Brass's rehearsals are multi-faceted events. Not only do they decide on repertoire, they start to grow a show. “Most decisions happen during rehearsals, especially the process of creating and staging a new show.”<sup>67</sup> The group collectively engages in the creative process because each member is responsible for contributing musical ideas and choreography. Because of the extensive use of choreography in their shows, Mnozil Brass usually works with a choreographer or a director. “For almost every new show we either work with a choreographer or a director or both.”<sup>68</sup> They have also hired a vocal coach.<sup>69</sup>

The process of creating a show takes Mnozil Brass some time. “It takes between six months to a year to bring a new show to its premiere with a lot of

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<sup>66</sup> Wilfried Brandstötter as quoted in Lindemann, 13.

<sup>67</sup> Wilfried Brandstötter as quoted in Ibid., 11.

<sup>68</sup> Wilfried Brandstötter as quoted in Ibid., 10.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

rehearsals, discussions, and all that stuff. After the premiere, we try to avoid rehearsing because we don't really like it."<sup>70</sup> The rehearsals are so intense and lengthy the group tries to avoid them. Once a show is put together it gets polished through performances.

The show continues to develop after the first performance. "After the premiere, a show starts to really grow. It changes its face, it develops and new things come to the surface."<sup>71</sup> According to Mnozil Brass, the most important element of making music is "to add [your] own personality to the music. [And] make the performance unique."<sup>72</sup> Each of their performances is slightly different. They actively try to be engaging during performances and respond to the audience's reactions. The result is a slightly different execution of rehearsed routines. Over time the show evolves and changes slightly. For a show to be considered fully developed, it takes "five to twenty-five"<sup>73</sup> performances.

### Les Trompettes de Lyon

Les Trompettes de Lyon is a successful and entertaining French trumpet quintet. Their shows are a unique blend of musical variety, choreography, staging, and humor. Their performances utilize many different types of trumpets, including piccolo, C, B-flat, alto and bass trumpets, as well as cornet and flugelhorn. They have performed at some important festivals and conventions,

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<sup>70</sup> Wilfried Brandstötter as quoted in Ibid., 12.

<sup>71</sup> Wilfried Brandstötter as quoted in Ibid., 13.

<sup>72</sup> Thomas Gansch as quoted in Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Thomas Gansch as quoted in Ibid.



including “Cannes, Montreux (Stravinsky Auditorium) and Paris (Olympia, Grand Rex, Saint Germain Auditorium),”<sup>74</sup> as well as the International Trumpet Guild Conventions in 2004 (Ft. Worth, TX) and 2010 (Sydney, Australia).<sup>75</sup>

Les Trompettes de Lyon formed in 1989 when a group of students from the music school in Lyon decided to put together a trumpet ensemble.<sup>76</sup> The original members are still in the group today: André Bonnici, Jean-Luc Richard, Didier Chaffard, Ludovic Roux, and Pierre Ballester. Les Trompettes de Lyon also employs an “art director François Rollin”<sup>77</sup> to help create their shows. The result is a use of props, lighting, and special effects to create Les Trompettes’s own characteristic style.

The ensemble performs a wide variety of music, ranging from classical to popular and jazz, and including opera overtures, famous ballets, and even waltzes. All of the music has to be transcribed or arranged for their unique instrumentation, and their entire program is memorized. This allows them total freedom of movement around the stage to execute the choreography and staging of François Rollin. This staging adds an extra layer of meaning to the music by creating a story or a series of vignettes. They can take a traditional piece of music and make it ironic or light-hearted. An example, from their *Canard Laqué* show, is their version of Richard Strauss’s *Also Sprach Zarathustra*. In the middle of the opening arpeggios, one of the members of the group runs on stage with a big

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<sup>74</sup> <http://www.lestrompettesdelyon.com/english.html> (accessed January 26, 2012).

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

balloon filled with helium. They then play a Spanish march and bounce the balloon around on the end of their bells. At the end of this selection, they pop the balloon and play *Taps* for it.<sup>78</sup>

Les Trompettes de Lyon's shows are divided into many different scenes or vignettes. Each scene has a central theme that could be focused on a concept, idea, or prop. They can have a few different musical selections throughout each section while the show progresses. The show is not designed necessarily with a central plot — an exposition, rising action, climax, and resolution — but rather a collage of these vignettes. Their shows do have a central theme to tie everything together, such as in their *Canard Laqué* (Peking Duck) show. Little stuffed-animal ducks, as well as plastic ones, make appearances in different vignettes throughout the show.<sup>79</sup>

### Blue Man Group

The Blue Man Group is an internationally famous trio whose performance is self-described as a “multi-sensory experience that combines theatre, percussive music, art, science and Vaudeville into a form of entertainment that is like nothing else.”<sup>80</sup> The Blue Man Group features three bald and brightly blue painted characters that do not speak. Dressed in long sleeve black outfits, and completely covered in blue paint, they move about the stage performing on specially designed percussion instruments and act out various skits. This ensemble provides an

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<sup>78</sup> *Canard Laqué*. DVD. Directed by François Bultean. 2002; Paris, France: Bonne Pioche, 2002.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> [http://www.bluemancasting.com/musician\\_history.php](http://www.bluemancasting.com/musician_history.php) (accessed January 26, 2012).

excellent example of how to create an entertaining program for an unusual instrumentation, on a large scale, and with multimedia. They continue to fill theatres around the globe and have long-running performances in New York, Chicago, Boston, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Orlando, Berlin, and Tokyo.<sup>81</sup> In addition to these performances, they have gone on tours, recorded a Grammy-nominated album, *Audio*, and have received glowing reviews.<sup>82</sup> They have also made appearances on such television shows as *The Tonight Show*, *Las Vegas*, *Scrubs*, and *Arrested Development*.

Because of the enormous success of Blue Man Group and the concealing quality of the blue costumes, the ensemble has expanded beyond the original three members to include different casts of blue men. The original founders still perform but have adjusted to more executive roles. Each city has its own cast and uniquely adapted show. The Blue Man Group has, in essence, cloned itself for further growth and earnings. Although no accurate figures were found, it is estimated that the group earns approximately \$1.4 million per week in revenues.<sup>83</sup>

The Blue Man Group was founded in 1988 in New York City by Chris Wink, Matt Goldman, and Phil Stanton.<sup>84</sup> Their idea was, “Why don’t we get bald and blue and do stuff?”<sup>85</sup> As for the color blue, “Chris had the initial image of this bald and blue character. It was afterward that we thought that red, and yellow, all

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> <http://www.blugman.com/> (accessed January 26, 2012).

<sup>83</sup> [http://www.robwalker.net/contents/as\\_blugman.html](http://www.robwalker.net/contents/as_blugman.html) (accessed January 26, 2012).

<sup>84</sup> *Blue Man Group: Inside the Tube*. DVD. Directed by Blue Man Group. 2006; Burbank, CA: Warner Music Group, 2006.

<sup>85</sup> Chris Wink as quoted in Ibid.

these other colors kind of have this baggage associated with them. Blue is like the Earth.”<sup>86</sup> Their occupations varied widely: actor, drummer, software producer, and food server.<sup>87</sup> Their first performance as the Blue Man Group was *Funeral for the 80's* in New York's Central Park, which was broadcast on MTV.<sup>88</sup> During this staged funeral for the 80's, the trio, dressed up as the blue men, took iconic items from that decade and burned them in a barrel.

The group continued to perform in Central Park and in small theatres around New York City, including King Tut's WaWa Hut, Performing Garage, Dixon Place, and PS 122.<sup>89</sup> These first performances did not receive much attention, but the ensemble continued to develop their show and their Blue Man character. Their attitude was, “We didn't want to just sit around waiting for some agent to discover us... We just wanted to go out. We had some things to say, we had some things we wanted to express, we didn't know how to do it, and we just did it.”<sup>90</sup> They were able to develop their first show, titled *Tubes*, and move into the off-Broadway Astor Palace Theatre in 1991.<sup>91</sup> This production also included a small backup band and many other theatrical elements that would be included in future shows.

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<sup>86</sup> Phil Stanton as quoted in Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Matt Goldman as quoted in Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/11/17/theater/theater-high-tech-meets-goo-with-blue-man-group.html> (accessed January 26, 2012).

This show received good reviews in *The New York Times*<sup>92</sup> and attracted audiences by word of mouth, but it was not until Regis Philbin and Kathie Lee saw the show in 1992 that it really became famous.<sup>93</sup> The Blue Man Group was invited to perform on *Live with Regis and Kathie Lee*, and “they put us on the map.”<sup>94</sup>

Up until that time, the original trio of Blue Men did all of the performances themselves. This grueling marathon included over one thousand shows, six days a week, over a three-year period.<sup>95</sup> Before one performance, Phil Stanton cut his hand and an understudy filled in. “It was a catalytic event.”<sup>96</sup> They realized that they could have other people as Blue Men and the original trio could take time off and think about expansion.

Their first show outside of New York City was in Boston, where they were trying to recreate their show with a different cast. They did encounter some difficulty accomplishing this, and so to help establish what Blue Man was, they decided to create a handbook.<sup>97</sup> This defined the Blue Man’s character, provided a template for reproduction, and planted the seeds for further expansion. Their next city for expansion was Chicago, where they found further success.

To keep up artistically with the demands of expansion and success, in 1997 the Blue Man Group purchased a building on Third Street in New York

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> *Blue Man Group: Inside the Tube*. DVD.

<sup>94</sup> Phil Stanton as quoted in Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> [http://www.robwalker.net/contents/as\\_blueman.html](http://www.robwalker.net/contents/as_blueman.html) (accessed January 26, 2012).

<sup>96</sup> Matt Goldman as quoted in Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> *Blue Man Group: Inside the Tube*. DVD.

City. This building served as a space to create new works. They were free to experiment with new ideas, create new and bigger instruments, shoot videos, and ultimately develop a new show that they would take to Las Vegas.<sup>98</sup> It was around this time that they recorded their first album, *Audio*, which also featured some of their newly-invented larger instruments. This album was nominated for a Grammy Award, and the ensemble was invited to play at the ceremony in 2001.<sup>99</sup>

When the Blue Man Group first opened in Las Vegas, they performed at the Luxor. The stage was much larger than ones they had previously appeared on, so they had to adjust to the enormous size of the space. This allowed them to use the larger instruments and exercise the freedom to carry out new ideas.<sup>100</sup> As a result, they used different music than previous shows, more special effects, and a larger backup band.<sup>101</sup> The Las Vegas venue eventually changed to the Venetian.

In the beginning, the Blue Man Group was “interested in performance art and science.”<sup>102</sup> Their early influences were various, including Kodo drumming, the Bauhaus absurdist art movement, Pink Floyd, and the comedy acts of Buster Keaton and the Marx Brothers.<sup>103</sup>

The current repertoire for the Blue Man Group has a heavy emphasis on rock and popular music. Most of these songs are played by the trio of Blue Men and the rest are supplemented by the backup band. In cases where there are lyrics,

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> <http://www.enotes.com/blue-man-group-reference/blue-man-group> (accessed January 26, 2012).

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

the singer from the house band is the one who performs them. Sometimes the music is just simple percussion motives accompanying comedy routines. The early group had a greater emphasis on a performance-art type of music. The transition to performing popular music almost exclusively occurred gradually as they realized what type of repertoire appealed to mass audiences. However, they always try to expand the possibilities of what they include in their repertoire. “Blue Man is always evolving, and the music is changing... Whatever you think that the Blue Man music is... it’s not a set thing. It’s more fun to go into the new territory.”<sup>104</sup>

Around 2000 the ensemble decided to venture into the realm of arena rock concerts. Their first attempt was at a rock festival in a large stadium in the Washington, D. C., area.<sup>105</sup> That performance did not go well and was described as a disaster.<sup>106</sup> This experience changed the way the group approached performances. They started making the transition from a theatre act to arena rockers in their music and special effects. They added lyrics to songs and recorded with different artists such as Dave Matthews and Venus Hum.<sup>107</sup> This shift provided another outlet for the Blue Man Group to express themselves. As a result, their musical selections are very accessible to a wide range of audiences.

The Blue Man Group has long-running shows in North America, Europe, and Asia. They have been able to have a successful enterprise because they have

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<sup>104</sup> Matt Goldman as quoted in *Blue Man Group: Inside the Tube*. DVD.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

constantly tried new, creative ways to entertain. “I think it’s really neat to keep putting Blue Man in unusual spaces where you don’t know what to expect... We like living in that space where you are not sure what to expect, not sure what the rules of the game are.”<sup>108</sup> The idea to create performances that are unpredictable was continually developed. The original founders Chris Wink, Matt Goldman, and Phil Stanton created new instruments and thought of new special effects, then designed them for a grander scale. Some of the results can be seen in their show, *The Complex Rock Tour Live*.<sup>109</sup> The following is the author’s brief description of an excerpt from that performance:

The setting is an enormous concert arena and the Blue Man Group is set up on a large stage. There are huge light-emitting diode (LED) screens, a sound system, stage lights, and special effects. The backup house band consists of multiple drummers on individual kits, guitars, and a vocalist/electric violinist. In the center of the stage, the Blue Man Group has their specially designed polyvinyl chloride (PVC) pipe instruments set up. The trio walks out and begins to play a rock jam in a minor key with bright orange paddles. The LED screen displays an image that helps set the mood for this musical selection. As the piece climaxes, the screen displays paper falling as if from the sky. This is enhanced by stage lights to make it appear that paper is falling from the catwalk scaffolding. The piece finishes and the stage goes dark.

Immediately after, a Blue Man comes back on stage wearing a PVC suit and he begins playing the opening figure of The Who’s *Teenage Wasteland*. He is joined by another Blue Man and eventually the backup band. The lyrics are sung by a female vocalist who also plays an electric violin solo later in the piece. At the climax of this song, the Blue Men wearing the PVC suits shoot rolls of streamers into the ecstatic audience. Streamers are also shot from stage cannons and from the catwalks. The piece ends with strobe lights and a final shot of streamers from the cannons.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Chris Wink as quoted in Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> *Blue Man Group The Complex Rock Tour Live*. DVD. Directed by Blue Man Group, 2003; Burbank, CA: Warner Music Group, 2003.

<sup>110</sup> *Blue Man Group The Complex Rock Tour Live*. DVD.



The Blue Man Group's performances rely heavily on multimedia and special effects. The LED screen helps make transitions in the show by displaying a variety of images and pre-recorded material. The stage lighting enhances the ambiance of the performance and also directs the audience's attention to different parts of the stage. Mechanical devices, such as streamer cannons, help the ensemble make a connection with the audience by bringing the performance off the stage and into the crowd. In total their performances are a successful blend of accessible music, multimedia, and entertainment.

## CHAPTER 2

### COMMON TRAITS OF SUCCESSFUL ENSEMBLES

Each of these ensembles share a set of common traits that aid in making connections with audiences. Most importantly, none of these groups is trying to copy anyone else. They have broken past traditions and forged their own identity. Before the Canadian Brass, there were not very many, or any, professional brass quintets that tried to be an entertaining entity. There were other professional brass quintets, such as the New York Brass Quintet, the Eastman Brass Quintet, and the American Brass Quintet, but those groups were traditional chamber ensembles. The Canadian Brass decided that they wanted to do something different so they could appeal to a variety of different audiences.

Mnozil Brass is a unique seven-member brass ensemble. No other brass chamber group has their specific instrumentation, which is without French horns. They are also unique because of their heavy emphasis on singing, staging, humor, and choreography. No one else can duplicate their repertoire, choreography, and performances. Similarly, Les Trompettes de Lyon is the only professional trumpet ensemble of its kind and no other trumpet ensemble has fully developed shows like it does. No other ensemble has a trio of iconic blue performers like the Blue Man Group has.

Whether verbal or non-verbal, the role of comedy is a prevalent trait shared by these groups. It is a vehicle not only for entertainment, but also for

show development and structure. The Canadian Brass started using verbal comedy in between pieces, but also included non-verbal comedy in their repertoire. For example, their *Flight of the Tuba-Bee* features their tuba player, Charles Daellenbach, playing the *Flight of the Bumblebee* as fast as possible. About half way through, trumpeter Ronald Romm does the fingerings for the tuba.<sup>111</sup>

Mnozil Brass's comedy is evident throughout their presentations in both the repertoire and the transitions. Their comedy is expressed verbally, through singing, yelling, or making animal sounds, as in the beginning of their version of the *William Tell Overture*.<sup>112</sup> As a cow bell sounds, they each make a different animal sound until the piece begins. Comedy is also prevalent in their gestures, staging, and music.

Les Trompettes de Lyon uses a mix of props, gestures, staging, and some talking to express their unique brand of comedy. At one point in their *Canard Laqué* show, they play a lullaby to help put the plastic duck to sleep. At the very end, one of the trumpeters awakes the duck with a loud blast.<sup>113</sup>

Blue Man Group uses gestures, movements, props, music, and multimedia to achieve its comedic goals. The marshmallows and gumballs scene from their shows illustrates how they use these devices. They bring out a bag of marshmallows and a gum ball container filled with paint balls. One of the Blue Men throws paint balls and marshmallows to the other Blue Men, while the

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<sup>111</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x5YqXjsJAI0> (accessed January 26, 2012).

<sup>112</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5\\_srdB2JGBI&feature=fvvr](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5_srdB2JGBI&feature=fvvr) (accessed January 26, 2012).

<sup>113</sup> *Canard Laqué*. DVD.

backup band makes sound effects with each throw and catch. The Blue Men make a painting by spitting the paint on a white board and a sculpture out of the marshmallows from the mouth of the other Blue Man.<sup>114</sup>

Due to the theatric nature of their shows, each ensemble uses choreography to varying degrees, ranging from simple stage positioning to elaborate dance sequences. This characteristic adds another layer of entertainment value to the performance. Because it can be difficult for musicians to coordinate themselves for staging purposes or advanced dance routines, each ensemble has employed the help of outside people — a choreographer, artistic director, or production crew. The Canadian Brass had help with their choreography for their *Tribute to the Ballet*.<sup>115</sup> For most of their new shows, Mnozil Brass uses “a choreographer, or a director, or both.”<sup>116</sup> Les Trompettes de Lyon has François Rollin as an artistic director, and the Blue Man Group has entire production teams to help put on their shows.

In part a result of choreography, large sections of music, if not all of the performance, are memorized. The performers are thereby freed from sitting behind music stands and can move about the stage and interact with the audience in any capacity they wish. The Canadian Brass performs most of their music from memory, while Mnozil Brass, Les Trompettes de Lyon, and Blue Man Group have their entire shows memorized.

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<sup>114</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RreqhPy\\_-fs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RreqhPy_-fs) (accessed January 26, 2012).

<sup>115</sup> Cichowicz, 718.

<sup>116</sup> Wilfried Brandstötter as quoted in Lindemann, 10.

Another common trait is the seamless presentation of the show from start to finish. These groups have found a way to make connections among diverse musical selections and put them together in fresh ways for the audience. The result is a constant flow of entertainment throughout the performance. As soon as one song or vignette is over, it transitions into the next one. There is no varying from that until the performers leave the stage.

The Canadian Brass connects their shows together by speaking to the audience in between musical selections, which helps facilitate the transition from one piece to the next. Mnozil Brass and Les Trompettes de Lyon mostly avoid formal speaking. Instead of musical selection-speaking- musical selection, and so on, their performances transition from one musical selection to the next through a variety of creative ways including props, acting, dancing, singing, or speaking.

The Blue Man Group's presentations are similar to those of Mnozil Brass and Les Trompettes de Lyon. They avoid traditional concert formats and rely on props and multimedia to help facilitate transitions. In their *How to Be a Megastar Live!* show, the performance makes transitions through the aid of a How-to-be-a-Rock-Star infomercial displayed on the giant LED screens.<sup>117</sup> This infomercial instructs the Blue Men on how to become famous, successful rock stars through a variety of different methods. When each method is completed the next one is introduced on the LED screen, an effective way to transition to the next scene and keep the presentation moving forward.

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<sup>117</sup> *Blue Man Group How To Be a Megastar Live!*. DVD. Directed by Blue Man Group. 2008; Burbank, CA: Warner Music Group, 2008.

All of these ensembles have musical selections that appeal to a wide range of audiences. This entails performing music from many different genres, including popular, rock, early jazz, and lighter classical pieces. Canadian Brass and Les Trompettes de Lyon perform primarily classical selections with some jazz and popular songs included. Mnozil Brass not only performs classical works, jazz, and popular songs but also includes rock and a heavier emphasis on jazz. The Blue Man Group performs mostly rock and popular music genres.

The level of execution of the performances and the musicianship are very high in all of these ensembles and the general audience is kept unaware of the musical difficulty involved. This high standard is attained through rehearsals, performing experience, and training. Most of the musicians in these groups formally studied music in schools. All of the members of Canadian Brass, Mnozil Brass, and Les Trompettes de Lyon are classically trained musicians who attended conservatories or universities. The exception is Blue Man Group, but their schooling came through experience. They had over one thousand performances before they started to generate mass audiences.<sup>118</sup>

Whether bringing an audience member on the stage or having the ensemble go out into the audience, each of these groups includes something to interact with the audience. This breaks the invisible stage barrier and makes the patrons feel more comfortable and invited into the presentation. To start their performances, the Canadian Brass walk in through the audience while playing *Just a Closer Walk with Thee*. Mnozil Brass rarely leaves the stage, but they make

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<sup>118</sup> [http://www.robwalker.net/contents/as\\_blueman.html](http://www.robwalker.net/contents/as_blueman.html) (accessed January 26, 2012).

eye contact with audience members and often focus on individuals, sometimes playing to an individual from the lip of the stage. Towards the end of Les Trompettes de Lyon's *Canard Laqué* show, they have the audience hum along with their rendition of *La Mer (Trenet)*.<sup>119</sup> The Blue Man Group has some notorious devices for audience interaction, such as shooting streamers into the audience<sup>120</sup> or inviting an audience member on stage for a fancy Twinkie dinner.<sup>121</sup>

None of these ensembles could achieve their level of success without group members who share similar core musical values. Not only must the musicians have some level of respect for one another and believe in the mission of the group, but there also has to exist some sort of chemistry within the ensemble. It is interesting to note that all of these groups have a connection with school. Trumpeters Ronald Romm and Fred Mills of the Canadian Brass were friends at The Juilliard School before they joined that ensemble.<sup>122</sup> The original members of Mnozil Brass studied music at the Vienna Music Academy.<sup>123</sup> The members of Les Trompettes de Lyon were trumpet students at the music school in Lyon, France, and are still together today.<sup>124</sup> Two of the founding members of Blue Man Group, Chris Wink and Matt Goldman, were also childhood schoolmates.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> *Canard Laqué*. DVD.

<sup>120</sup> *Blue Man Group The Complex Rock Tour Live*. DVD.

<sup>121</sup> *Blue Man Group: Inside the Tube*. DVD.

<sup>122</sup> [http://thewholenote.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=2352:trumpeter-fred-mills&catid=45:choral-communitybandsorchestras&Itemid=197](http://thewholenote.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2352:trumpeter-fred-mills&catid=45:choral-communitybandsorchestras&Itemid=197) (accessed January 26, 2012).

<sup>123</sup> Lindemann, 10.

<sup>124</sup> <http://www.les Trompettes de Lyon.com/english.html> (accessed January 26, 2012).

<sup>125</sup> *Blue Man Group: Inside the Tube*. DVD.

## CHAPTER 3

### IMPLEMENTATION OF COMMON TRAITS

#### The Omni Brass Ensemble

The Omni Brass Ensemble is a quintet consisting of two trumpets, trombone, tuba, and percussion. The group was formed as part of the project at hand to “grow a show” and create alternative performance opportunities. The instrumentation is a variation of the standard brass quintet model, in that French horn is omitted and percussion added. The members of the group are personal friends of the author and were handpicked for this project. The ensemble consisted of Randolph Lee and Luis Araya on trumpet, Steve McAllister on trombone, Gabriel Sears on tuba, and Matt Coleman on percussion.

The original Omni Brass Ensemble consisted only of trumpet and tuba. The duo put together a short fifteen-minute program and first performed it at a church talent show with enthusiastic response.<sup>126</sup> The program included three diverse musical selections, comedy (verbal and non-verbal), light choreography, and audience participation through singing and clapping. The last musical selection was memorized so the ensemble could freely interact with the audience. The presentation was continuous and comedy was used to aid in transitions. Here is a brief description of this performance:

The performance began with a comical introduction from the master of ceremonies, who said that an orchestra was about to perform. The curtain opened and the only person on stage was Gabriel Sears with

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<sup>126</sup> LDS Church, Tempe Ward Talent Show 9/18/2010.



his tuba. The audience laughed and the author came out with his trumpet and assumed the role of concertmaster, asking for three tuning A's for the imaginary orchestra. He then sat down and they began an arrangement of Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro* Overture by Samuel Pilafian and David Hickman. At the end, the two musicians stood up and competed for the audience's praise, by scuffling and challenging each other to a duel.

The musicians, standing on opposite sides of the stage, began a duet with a series of exchanges between the trumpet and tuba. The piece ended when the tubist was chased off stage. He eventually came back to the stage with a sousaphone and began an opening cadenza to *When the Saints Go Marching In*. At this point, the two went out into the audience. After the melody was played by the trumpet, the audience joined in with singing and clapping. The duo finished the selection by walking through the audience and out of the auditorium.

After this first performance, the pair was able to talk to various audience members and receive feedback. The general response was very positive, especially concerning places where the audience took part in the presentation. One audience member even said, "You guys should take this on the road!"<sup>127</sup>

A variation of the program was also taken to a local middle school and received similar positive responses.<sup>128</sup> This feedback indicated that the concept worked with a variety of audiences. A major drawback, however, was the constant playing of both musicians during musical selections. Because of the nature of brass instruments, these performances required great endurance and their length had to be limited. To develop a longer and more elaborate show, the author decided to expand the ensemble to five members. One of the five, a percussionist, was added to maximize the musical versatility of the ensemble and provide opportunities of rest for the brass players.

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<sup>127</sup> LDS Church, Tempe Ward Talent Show 9/18/2010.

<sup>128</sup> McKemy Middle School, Tempe, AZ. Fall 2010.

As learned from the Canadian Brass, the music for performances should be a thoughtful blend of selections that the ensemble genuinely wants to play and that they feel the audience would want to listen to. The repertoire is meant to be entertaining, educational, and enjoyable for an audience consisting of musicians and non-musicians. The selections that the Omni Brass Ensemble included were popular songs, rock, jazz, and classical works.

All of the arrangements and transcriptions for the larger ensemble were made by the author. Some of these transcriptions included a classical overture, a movement from a piano sonata, a Baroque concerto, and a few popular songs. The rest of the music was learned from lead sheets (melodies and chord symbols) and were collectively arranged during rehearsals. These simple arrangements consisted of an introduction, the main melody, and improvisational solos. The melody is accompanied by improvised harmonies such as a “walking” bass line (tuba), “tailgate” trombone, and obbligato parts in the trumpet. The percussion provides a corresponding rhythmic pattern to the style of each song or work.

Once Omni Brass felt it had enough repertoire to include in a program, it started to form a performance order and approach. As with Mnozil Brass, everything played in the show would have to be presented in a unique way. There were also certain parameters to be met for programming the show. The show would be divided into two halves with a heavier emphasis on classical music in the first half. The second half would have more musical variety, comedy, and surprises. Each musician would have a piece that featured them, and not every

musician would be used on every piece to allow adequate rest. The program order needed to be filled with enough musical variety to keep the listener interested, and the placement of each piece had to fit the flow of the program.

Once the program order was determined, the real challenge was to find creative ways of making seamless transitions from piece to piece. These transitions could be almost anything, as long as they filled the gaps between pieces. An example is the transition between the first and second works: at the end of the first piece, the brass players leave the stage out of frustration with the percussionist, who plays along with the ensemble when he is not supposed to. The percussionist then has an unaccompanied solo. While off-stage, the brass players begin to play auxiliary percussion instruments and one by one come back onstage. The tuba player stops playing percussion and begins to play the opening bass line figure of the next piece. Gradually the rest of the brass players pick up their regular instruments and start the next musical selection.

Comedy was an important element to incorporate in the show. This included verbal and non-verbal sections and ironic presentations of traditional musical pieces. In feedback from a performance, it was suggested to move away from speaking too much and focus on using stage presence and acting to dramatize the comedy. This change of balance would align more closely with how Blue Man Group, Mnozil Brass, and Les Trompettes de Lyon present their comedy.

Another important element in the design of the show was originality. It needed to be a unique presentation that would best utilize the talents of the performers in the ensemble. The show was thus tailored around the individual members of the group, and each member had a musical feature. Non-traditional instruments such as extra percussion, slide whistles, Boomwhackers (colorful PVC pipes cut to different lengths to produce different pitches),<sup>129</sup> electronic amplifiers, distortion pedals, and electronic keyboards were also incorporated into the show. The main aspects of originality, however, were the repertoire selected, transitions, and the way the pieces were presented. The result was a unique performance that did not copy those of other groups.

There was some light choreography and staging in Omni Brass's show. There could have been more, but because most of the pieces were not memorized, playing behind a music stand was necessary and this limited the amount of movement during each musical selection. The pieces that were improvised allowed more freedom to move about the stage and into the audience. Due to limited time for rehearsals and preparation, choreography was somewhat minimal during performances. If the ensemble were to develop more shows, complete memorization of the music and the services of a choreographer would be employed.

Each of the members of the ensemble studied music at Arizona State University and had experience performing a variety of different musical genres. Given the amount of time spent in just four rehearsals, the performance went

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<sup>129</sup> <http://boomwhackers.com>.

extraordinarily well. Even Mnozil Brass says it takes six months to a year to create a show, and five to twenty-five performances to perfect it.<sup>130</sup>

The Omni Brass show had the ensemble go into the audience a few times. The second half started with the tuba in the audience. Immediately following, an exchange between the tuba and trumpet (at front of stage) ensued. At the end of the performance, the ensemble played an encore piece and went out into the audience, where they get the audience to clap and sing before the ensemble walks out of the auditorium.

The main performance of the full ensemble with the developed show occurred April 26, 2011, in a local church auditorium.<sup>131</sup> To help gather an audience the author made posters and fliers advertising free admission, popcorn, and root beer. Individual members of Omni Brass told family and friends, and an audience of approximately sixty attended.

There was one dress rehearsal in the auditorium, which provided essential insights for staging, the stage curtain, equipment placement, lighting, and sound levels for the electronic equipment. No microphones were used for speaking or playing, but amplifiers were used for the electronic keyboard and electronic trumpet mute with distortion pedal. The entire show lasted about ninety minutes, including an intermission and was video recorded for further study. Here is the author's description of that performance:

At the beginning of the performance, the stage curtains open as the ensemble, minus the percussionist, walk onstage. The brass players begin

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<sup>130</sup> Lindemann, 13.

<sup>131</sup> LDS Church, 2707 S College Ave Tempe AZ, 4/26/11.

to play a transcription of Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro Overture* only to be interrupted by comedic interjections from percussionist, Matthew Coleman. Each time, Coleman is kicked off stage by the brass players. Towards the end of the overture, Coleman sneaks on stage and sits down at the drum set in the middle of the ensemble. He begins to play along with the music until he overpowers the group. The brass players play a *fortissimo* last chord and walk off stage out of frustration. Coleman is then free to play an improvised percussion solo until the brass players join in with auxiliary percussion instruments. The brass players gradually pick up their regular brass instruments and play the beginning of Chuck Mangione's *Feels So Good*. Here, Luis Araya is featured on flugelhorn and trades improvised solos with Randolph Lee on trumpet. At the end of the piece, the brass players pick up the auxiliary percussion instruments again and gradually leave the stage until Lee is the only one left. Lee then goes over to Araya's unattended flugelhorn and begins to play it. The rest of the ensemble, minus Araya, comes back on stage and begins to play a polka version of Disney's *Once Upon a Dream*, with Lee dancing around with Araya's flugelhorn. The piece is interrupted when Araya comes back on stage and plays a series of loud high notes to indicate his disapproval of Lee playing his flugelhorn. An argument ensues and it is determined that the flugelhorn would rather be with Lee. Depressed, Araya picks up his trumpet as the stage lights dim and change to blue. The ensemble then plays a transcription of Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* with Araya playing most of the melody. At the end of the piece, Lee gives the flugelhorn back to Araya and the ensemble celebrates with George Weiss's *What a Wonderful World*. An improvised funky selection in the key of G finishes the first half while the ensemble walks off stage and the curtains close.

The second half begins with a tuba solo starting in the back of the audience. Gabriel Sears wears a bright red wig and gradually comes to the front of the stage. At the end of the piece, and from the back of the audience, Lee argues with Sears saying he could play the piece better. Sears disagrees and the two perform, in front of the stage, a transcription of Arthur Smith's *Dueling Banjos*. At the end of the selection, the ensemble has the audience vote on a winner through applause. Both performers receive applause but the voting is interrupted by Steven McAllister playing on his keyboard. The ensemble reassembles on stage, McAllister introduces slide whistles to them, and they perform a crude rendition of Albert Von Tilzer's *Take Me Out to the Ball Game*. Towards the end of the piece, Lee and Araya dance around the stage and get kicked off by the other ensemble members. The rest of the ensemble plays Clarence Williams's *I've Found a New Baby* featuring McAllister on trombone. In the middle of McAllister's improvised cadenza, Lee and Araya interrupt by playing the beginning of the third movement of Bach/Vivaldi's *Concerto in D*. The brass players perform the entire third

movement while Coleman reads a paper at his drum set. At the end of the movement, Lee walks over to an amp at the side of the stage. He picks up a trumpet with an electronic mute connected to a distortion pedal and plays the Shaker melody *Simple Gifts*, once without the distortion pedal off, and a second time with it on. When the distortion pedal is on it makes Lee's trumpet sound like an electric guitar. Sears and Lee then play the beginning of Guns N' Roses' *Sweet Child o' Mine* when Araya interrupts and suggests they play something by The Beatles. The group then plays a transcription of *Something* by The Beatles with Lee playing the lead guitar part on his electronically muted trumpet with the distortion pedal on. At the end of the transcription, Lee goes off stage and throws a boomwhacker at Araya. The rest of the ensemble goes off stage, gets more boomwhackers, and comes back on stage to play an introduction to their final musical selection, a transcription of Journey's *Don't Stop Believing*. They gradually transition back to their regular instruments and finish the transcription. After that final number, the ensemble bows and plays an encore selection of *When the Saints Go Marching* in. They walk out into the audience and out of the auditorium to finish the entire program.

The general response to the performance was very positive. The audience, consisting of musicians and non-musicians, seemed to enjoy the presentation. One enthusiastic audience member even said that this was the best show she had ever been to.<sup>132</sup> A recurring constructive criticism suggested fewer talking sections and after reviewing the performance video, the author concurs with this suggestion. The talking sections were unscripted and sometimes broke the flow of the program. Also, the need for a choreographer or some other form of staging help became apparent.

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<sup>132</sup> Wendy Lea, LDS Church 2707 S College Ave Tempe AZ, 4/26/11.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSION

In a competitive musical landscape, creating an entertaining show for an adventurous chamber ensemble can help the group be more attractive to a wider range of audiences, and thereby generate more income for the ensemble because of increased attendance. Such a show would also introduce chamber music to audiences who might normally avoid going to chamber music concerts. This musical missionary work would also benefit the more conservative chamber ensembles, because it makes the genre relevant to larger portions of the population.

The tradition of creating entertaining programs for brass chamber ensembles has been reinvented and adapted to modern culture by groups like the Canadian Brass, Mnozil Brass, and Les Trompettes de Lyon. Other types of groups, like the Blue Man Group, offer additional examples of how to form an entertaining program of non-brass instrumentation, on a large scale, and with the aid of multimedia. All of these groups have a set of shared traits, including originality, comedy, choreography, memorization, continuous presentation, musical appeal, high-quality musicality, and the proper personnel. Each ensemble applies these traits uniquely, but shares the common desire to make a connection with audiences. These attributes were tested with the author's Omni Brass



Ensemble with positive results. The need for a choreographer, however, did present itself during this experience.

It is possible to be a professional chamber musician, and many groups are currently enjoying chamber music careers. With the application of these successful performance traits, an ensemble can create an entertaining program. After all, why would anyone “want to sit through anything boring”?<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Ronald Romm as quoted in Cichowicz, 718.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Randolph Lee is a freelance trumpeter and teacher in the greater Phoenix metropolitan area. A native of San Diego, California he was born January 9, 1982. He began his musical studies with his father and later took trumpet lessons from Jay Posteraro. He earned a Bachelor of Arts degree from Brigham Young University in 2007 where he studied with David Brown. He then attended the University of California Los Angeles to study with Jens Lindemann and graduated with a Master of Music degree in 2009. His Doctorate of Musical Arts degree was earned at Arizona State University under the tutelage of Regents' Professor David Hickman in 2012. He has performed with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Philip Glass Ensemble, Tucson Symphony Orchestra, Phoenix Chorale, Phoenix Boys Choir, Salt River Brass, Scottsdale Arts Orchestra, Utah Regional Ballet, as well as many chamber ensembles. As a soloist, he has performed recitals and appeared with the Scottsdale Musical Arts Orchestra, ASU Trumpet Ensemble, ASU Schola Cantorum, UCLA Philharmonia, UCLA Brass Ensemble, UCLA Symphonic Band, BYU Synthesis jazz band, as well as high school and community bands. Performances have taken him throughout the United States, Mexico, England, Scotland, Wales, France, Spain, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and the Czech Republic. When not performing, he enjoys spending time with his wife Tiffany Lee, and their two daughters, Indi and London.